

Session 13: The Primeval History of Genesis 1 – 11

D3. The pattern of the primeval history

The editorial passage in 6:5-8 provides an interpretative key to the stories in the primeval history. Another clue is provided by the way they are arranged. The pattern is that of sin followed by judgement, in which there is also an element of mercy. For example, is punished for the murder of his brother by being forced to become a wanderer (and not a settled agriculturalist any more) – but he is given a mark of divine protection. The Flood destroys the whole world – but Noah is saved and God promises never again to disrupt the order of nature to such an extent.

After the Flood an 'interim order' comes into existence. It has been made clear not only that humankind is so evil that it deserves destruction, but that our own sinfulness is likely to lead to destruction; yet, despite this, God promises to preserve us and the created world. Clearly this cannot be a final state of things. Some further action of God is implicitly called for.

D4. The Tower of Babel

The final story in the primeval history is the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11. It is a story of divine judgement on technological and political pride. This particular group of human beings think they can become little gods to themselves: they can build a tower to reach the skies and through it make a name for themselves. But Yahweh's decision is to thwart their enterprise by disrupting their unity. There will be no universal human family: this is only restored in the new creation that follows Jesus' death and resurrection, symbolised by the gift of tongues on the Day of Pentecost.

The attempt to achieve divinity by technological means and the quest for unity without God are still features of human life. They are exemplified by an advertisement for BT of the 1990s. The images in the advert presented the great sweep of human progress from monkey to human beings: ancient Temples and towers, a theatre of ancient Greece and finally a BT satellite receiver. The commentary was spoken by Stephen Hawking, a man enabled to talk by technology and regarded as a universal sage for his achievements in theoretical physics. The commentary was:

"One discovery shaped the course of human history: we learned to talk. This allowed the communication of ideas, enabling human beings to build the impossible. mankind's greatest achievements have come about by talking, and its greatest failures by not talking (at this point the screen featured images of a desert littered with burned out tanks). It doesn't have to be like this. our greatest hopes could become reality. With the knowledge at our disposal the possibilities are unbounded. all we have to do is to make sure we keep on talking."

The advert is a perfect expression of this part of the contemporary Western creation myth. It claims that people are God: 'with the knowledge at our disposal the possibilities are unlimited'. But the Hebrew/Christian creation myth expressed in these chapters portrays this as rebellion, and says that its result is disunity, the scattering of humankind, with division and hostility. Reflection on history suggests that political and technological pride leads to the domination of

some over others: wealthy and capable individuals over those less capable, wealthy nations over poorer ones. In the rest of the Bible Babel or Babylon becomes a paradigm for the oppressors of God's people, whose final judgement is celebrated in the book of Revelation.

D5. The place of the primeval history in the biblical narrative

It is extremely significant that Yahweh's judgement on the builders of the Tower of Babel is not followed by a word of preservation, as with Cain and the Flood. In its place is the genealogy and call of Abraham:

Genesis 12:1-3

Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'

This is both the conclusion to the primeval history and the introduction to the stories of the patriarchs which follow. The Tower of Babel story ends with judgement on the whole world; the promise to Abram is of blessing for the whole world.

J makes its point by linking the stories together. By linking Abram's story to the primeval history in this way the point is being made that what Yahweh is doing through Abram is to be seen in the context of his purpose for the whole world. It shows how Abraham's story and, by implication, Israel's story is God's response to the problems of the human race as a whole.

The rest of the Bible from Genesis 12 on is a story of salvation. It shows God acting in the history of a tiny, insignificant nation. First he created Israel from nothing by Calling Abram from Ur; then he rescued it from probably extinction through slavery and oppression in Egypt. Next he set out to teach them his ways. While they continually grieved his heart by disobedience he was patient and forgiving again and again. In the end Israel became the suffering servant of God through being punished for its disobedience and thus enduring suffering on behalf of all nations.

Genesis chapters 1 – 11 show us what the problem was: why there was a need for salvation in the first place. It is like a 'who-dunnit' in which the murder is committed in the first chapter and the rest of the book is about how the detective tries to solve the crime. Genesis 6 tells us that the heart of humanity was so wicked that the only thing to do was to destroy everyone and start again. But after the Flood God says something different: despite the fact that 'every inclination of human heart is evil from youth' (8:21), he will keep the created world and with it the human race in being. This decision of God sets the scene for another story: the story of a long process of 'wooing' through which God sets out to win back the human heart by love, to cancel out sin and make us ready to enjoy fellowship with him again.

Further Reading

For more information on Genesis 1 – 11, see:

John Drane: *Introducing the Old Testament*, chapters 9 and 12

or

Etiene Charpentier, *How to Read the Old Testament*, chapters 5 and 6

Preparation

The key Bible passages for session 14 are:

Exodus 25, and 31 – 34

Numbers 1 - 3